

Claremont McKenna College Public Art Project
Gould Center for Humanistic Studies



Ellsworth Kelly
Totem (for Claremont)

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Essay by
Yve-Alain Bois

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FOREWORD

Shortly after arriving on the Claremont McKenna College (CMC) campus over five years ago, I had a number of discussions with trustee Chris Walker '69 and other members of the community about how to put the arts into the liberal arts at CMC. In the Claremont Colleges, where students from any one college may enroll freely in classes at any other, art courses are the province of superb programs at Scripps and Pomona Colleges and the Graduate University. To avoid duplication, CMC has no formal art department or curriculum.

Nonetheless, our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and trustees love the arts, and see the arts as vitally important to our understanding of and contributions to every aspect of the world we inhabit, from the melodies and rhythms in the language we choose, to the designs in our thinking and institutions, to our appreciation of the natural and built environment.

To answer these strong interests, we sought to create vehicles for artistic expression. We renovated a basement dorm and purchased music equipment, storing it in a secure cage-like structure; several students developed it into an underground music studio and performance space called the Cave (it has subsequently been renovated). A \$200,000 gift from Duane and Chris Quaini funded the Arts Council, a new student organization that provides grants to students who want to do art projects on campus. One of the Claremont Colleges' acapella groups supported by CMC was a finalist in the national championships this past year. And the Gould Center for Humanistic Studies continues to sponsor artists in residence to teach screenwriting, documentary filmmaking, and painting.

Under the inspired leadership of Chris Walker, Ken Novack '67, and other members of the Board of Trustees, and with invaluable advice from Mary Beebe (who at the University of California at San Diego led the Stuart Collection, one of the most successful public art initiatives of any campus in the world) and support from the Gould Center—directed by Barton Evans and H. Andrea Neves Professor of Literature Robert Faggen (2008-18), with Phillip Kaiser, a fellow at the Gould Center—we implemented the CMC public art initiative “to enrich the cultural, intellectual, and scholarly life of CMC and the Claremont community.” First up, the Gould Center hosted artist Mary Weatherford for a semester, during which she created her mural *From the Mountain to the Sea*; the painting was donated by a group of our trustees on the public art committee in 2014, and now hangs in our very own Athenaeum.

This fall, we celebrate the addition of two spectacular sculptures to our emerging public art collection: Ellsworth Kelly's *Totem* and Chris Burden's *Meet in the Middle*. Both were gifts of Trustee George Roberts '66 P'93 and his wife, Linnea. To mark the occasion, we are producing a special tribute publication for each piece, and I have the honor and special privilege of saying a few words about what the introduction of these great works means to me in the context of our college and campus.

First, on behalf of the Board and the entire college community, I am especially grateful for the leadership of Chris Walker and the other members of the public art committee; for the extraordinary generosity of George and Linnea Roberts; for the advice and counsel of Bob Faggen, Phillip Kaiser, and Mary Beebe; for the enthusiasm of our students and their accomplishment in the arts, as

they pursue other primary fields of study; and for the support of Kimberly Petropoulos, Dorothy Buchanan, and Ken Eppinger, who have provided invaluable support.

Second, the impact of a powerful piece of public art is incalculable. It inspires us to see the world in new ways. Intervening forms sharpen our view to see what is already there and to provide a visual expression that moves us emotionally or triggers a more abstract thought or value we cherish.

In Kelly's *Totem*, I am struck by the beauty of the sky's many reflections sparkling off of the sculpture's shiny white automotive surface. Mostly I see the perfect form of scaled aspiration, a gesture to the steepest ridges of the San Gabriel mountain range to the north. It captures without confining the pure ambitions of Claremont McKenna College: the search for the piercing, searing, soaring truth, the courage to learn and speak it, lead with and from it. The totem posts and anchors a tether that spins—in a virtuous cycle—between the Athenaeum's intellectual ambition, open inquiry, and community building and the Roberts Pavilion's heightened venue for the athletic training, teamwork, and competition that helps build and shape the human spirit. Kelly elevates us.

In Burden's *Meet in the Middle*, I am moved by the artist's nineteenth-century gesture to the social network we once knew as the park, to the backlit screen we knew as the street lamp, and the URL we knew as the cast-iron bench. Burden attended Pomona during a divisive time in our history, and the design of his legacy defies division. His piece takes the form of two concentric circles (the inner interior-facing, the exterior looking out). In an age of

division, polarization, and texting over talking and listening in real time, the inner circle is about the strength of our community, how we look at ourselves and one another, break bread together, evaluate ourselves, seek improvements in our imperfections, and engage in dialogue to solve complex problems. The outer circle speaks to the mission we have in public affairs, our purpose, our commitment to make a difference in the world outside our campus on the issues of our time. We draw on the power of our inner circle and sense of connection to one another to inform our outward gaze. This inner sanctum in turn empowers our exterior commitment and public leadership. In a world of polarized communities, this installation creates a center from a void and provides us a place (both physical and mental) to meet in the middle. Burden brings us together.

George and Linnea Roberts have given us something that sets our minds and hearts on our most cherished values. Now it is our responsibility to make the most of it, to let these forms move us. Elevate us. Bring us together.

Hiram E. Chodos
President, Claremont McKenna College